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Rozier, Samantha PhD and Santos, Carla A., "Using Consumer Behavior Scales to Examine the Persuasiveness of Travel Narratives" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 45.
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Using Consumer Behavior Scales to Examine the Persuasiveness of Travel Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Currently, an understanding of how travelers process promotional travel-related narratives or information sources is lacking in tourism literature. Moreover, when examined in the context of tourism, promotional narratives have been largely examined by literary and history scholars from a more critical standpoint where, in short, conclusions often assume the narratives examined possess a certain level of persuasive power. As such, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the general persuasive power of travel narratives. To do so, the study incorporated two consumer behavior scales, Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale, as well as Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1988) Skepticism Toward Advertising scale (SKEP), to measure individuals processing of travel narratives, as well as their perceived level of skepticism towards travel narratives presented in two different formats—travel articles and travel brochures. The utilization of these consumer behavior scales allowed for an examination of the degree to which presentation format, message cue, skepticism towards travel articles, and skepticism towards travel brochures influenced participants' narrative transportation. Additionally, the relationship between participants' skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures was examined.

INTRODUCTION

While travel continues to be a popular leisure activity, the reality remains that before tourists can select a destination to visit, they must first have some prior knowledge of that destination. In fact, "For a tourism destination to be successful, it must first have an awareness, and second a positive image" (Milman & Pizam, 1995, p. 22). As such, an important challenge for destination management organizations (DMO's) is designing effective promotional communications to create awareness among potential and/or return visitors. To date, DMO's have relied heavily on the use of written, mass-produced travel narratives accessible in a variety of promotional formats such as brochures. Indeed, the use of narratives "has been the key ingredient in the emergence of tourism as a modern industry" (Bendix, 2002, p. 469). Investigation into the use of such narratives has led to research which examines among others information search behaviors (e.g., Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993), effectiveness of promotional campaigns (e.g., Gladwell & Wolff, 1989; Kim, Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2005; Loda, Norman & Backman, 2005), and representational dynamics (e.g., Fürsich &

Kavoori, 2001; Santos, 2004, 2006). Regardless of what route research has taken, whether it has been to examine effectiveness of promotional campaigns, information search behaviors or representational dynamics within travel narratives, an underlying assumption of persuasiveness exists within these lines of research. In other words, current travel narratives research assumes *a priori* that the narratives possess persuasive power. Such research, however, lacks a concrete examination of the actual persuasiveness held by travel narratives. In response, this exploratory study sought to examine the general persuasive power of travel narratives. It measured how individuals process travel narratives, as well as their perceived level of skepticism towards travel narratives presented in two different formats—travel articles and travel brochures—by incorporating Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale, as well as Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1988) Skepticism Toward Advertising scale (SKEP). Transportation refers to the way "narratives may exert their power to change beliefs" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 718) while SKEP relates to readers' sense of disbelief in advertising and the way in which readers regard an advertisement claim as either more or less believable or truthful. The importance of understanding transportation and skepticism resides in the fact that both have been linked to overall message persuasiveness; and as such, both are essential to understanding travel narrative persuasiveness, as well as develop effective tourism promotional communications.

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the cells of the 3x2 (Message cue: travel article, advertisement, no cue x Presentation format: story or list) between-subjects factorial design. The study incorporated six surveys; each identical except for message cue given (travel article, travel brochure, no cue) and presentation format (story versus list). The six versions were: 1) Travel article message cue (publicity) with story format; 2) Travel article message cue (advertising) with list format; 3) Travel brochure message cue (publicity) with story format; 4) Travel brochure message cue (advertising) with list format; 5) No message cue with story format; and 6) No message cue with list format. Depending upon the survey received, participants were instructed to read an excerpt taken from either a travel article, a travel brochure or to simply read the excerpt on the next page. Participants were then asked to read an excerpt presented in story format or an excerpt presented in a bulleted list format. The list format was created using the information presented in the narrative excerpt. All participants were asked to answer six questions relating to the Transportation scale, eight SKEP statements relating to travel articles, and eight SKEP statements relating to travel brochures. The total usable data sample from the combined six survey groups consisted of 526 completed surveys.

Narrative Transportation Scale: Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale was incorporated in order to examine the assumed persuasive power of travel narratives by measuring a narrative's ability to transport readers using both a story format and a list format. Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale includes a total of 11 question-items measured on a 7-point scale anchored by *Not at all* to *Very much*; where higher scores represent greater transportation. In this study, the Transportation scale was adapted to include a total of six questions, each slightly re-worded to include "travel narrative" as the focus (e.g., I could picture myself in the destination described in the travel narrative). Questions 2, 5 and 6, in the scale are reverse coded. In order to assess the ability of a

travel narrative (story vs. list format) to transport readers, participants' answers to the six Transportation scale questions were summed, yielding scores ranging from 13-42; where higher scores indicate greater degrees of narrative transportation and thus, greater persuasiveness. When used in its entirety, the Transportation scale has been shown to yield a Cronbach's Alpha score of .77 (Green, 2004) and .72 (Wang & Calder, 2006); in this study, alpha reliability tests yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of .812. *Skepticism Toward Advertising Scale*: Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1988) SKEP scale was incorporated to measure participants' level of skepticism concerning travel articles and travel brochures as informational sources; providing an examination of the assumed persuasive power held by promotional travel narratives. SKEP consists of nine statements operationalized using a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*; where the higher the score, the higher the skepticism. This study incorporated eight of the original SKEP questions and applied the scale twice, once to examine participants' skepticism towards travel brochures and once to examine participants' skepticism towards travel articles as information sources. Wording was manipulated to substitute "advertising" to include either "travel brochures" or "travel articles". This allowed the adapted SKEP scale to measure how participants' level of skepticism towards publicity based messages (e.g., travel articles) versus advertising based messages (e.g., travel brochures) differed. Before answering the two SKEP statement sets, participants were supplied with a definition of both a travel article and a travel brochure. Participants' overall score was computed by summing the eight statement items, yielding scores that ranged from 13-24 for skepticism toward travel articles and 8-40 toward brochures; where higher scores indicated lower degrees of skepticism. When used in its entirety, the scale has shown to yield a Cronbach's Alpha score of .86 (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, 2000), and .825 (Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005); for this study, alpha reliability tests yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of .916 for SKEP towards travel articles and .932 for SKEP towards travel brochures.

FINDINGS

Participants ranged between the ages of 45-53 (27.9%) and 54-62 (28.9%). Almost three-quarters of the participants were female (73.2%).

RQ1: How is participants' degree of narrative transportation influenced by presentation format? T-test analysis illustrated that participants who received a story format to read ($M=33.43$; $SD=5.53$) and participants who received a list format to read [$M=33.22$; $SD=5.92$; $t(524)=.412$; $p=.681$] did not differ significantly in their degree of narrative transportation.

RQ2: How is participants' degree of narrative transportation influenced by message cue? In examining the influence of message cue, participants were divided into three groups according to which message cue they received (Group 1: travel brochure; Group 2: travel article; Group 3: no cue). ANOVA results indicated a statistically significant difference in narrative transportation scores for the three message cue groups [$F(2, 523)=8.6$; $p<.000$]. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for participants who were cued travel brochure ($M=31.59$; $SD=6.03$) were significantly different from participants cued travel article ($M=33.93$; $SD=5.30$) and from

participants who received no message cue ($M=33.93$; $SD=5.81$); those cued travel article did not differ significantly from those who did not receive a cue. These results suggest that participants who received the travel article cue and participants who did not receive a message cue experienced a significantly greater degree of narrative transportation than participants who received the travel brochure cue.

RQ3: How is participants' degree of narrative transportation influenced by participants' skepticism towards travel articles? T-test analysis illustrated a statistically significant difference in narrative transportation scores from participants with high skepticism towards travel articles ($M=31.93$; $SD=5.71$) to participants with low skepticism towards travel articles [$M=35.00$; $SD=5.31$; $t(524)=-6.35$; $p<.000$]. These results suggest that as participants' skepticism towards travel articles decreases, their degree of narrative transportation increases.

RQ4: How is participants' degree of narrative transportation influenced by participants' skepticism towards travel brochures? T-test analysis illustrated a statistically significant difference in narrative transportation scores from participants with high skepticism towards travel brochures ($M=31.94$; $SD=5.75$) to participants with low skepticism towards travel brochures [$M=34.88$; $SD=5.33$; $t(524)=-6.05$; $p<.000$]. These results suggest that as participants' skepticism towards travel brochures decreases, their degree of narrative transportation increases.

RQ5: What is the relationship between participants' skepticism towards travel brochures and participants' skepticism towards travel articles? Results of a Pearson's bivariate correlation revealed a significant relationship between participants' skepticism towards travel brochures and participants' skepticism towards travel articles ($r=.598$; $p\leq.000$). Suggesting, that as participants' skepticism towards travel brochures increases, participants' skepticism towards travel articles also increases.

IMPLICATIONS

Both processing and perceived skepticism have been linked to overall message persuasiveness and as such, an understanding of both is essential to developing effective tourism promotional communications. While much of past research relating to information search and information use examined *what* sources travelers are collecting and using, it is central that we examine *how* travelers are using these sources and *what* affects travelers' processing of these information sources. Research related to these issues can identify *what* affects the overall persuasiveness of travel-related promotional messages, providing practitioners with the ability to create more effective promotional travel campaigns. Indeed, as the use of social media tools (e.g., YouTube, flickr, myspace, facebook, blogs, Linkedin, etc.), social media optimization methods (SMO), and consumer-generated media (CGM) increase in their use to market and promote destinations, research is required to examine the persuasiveness held by such promotional techniques and the overall effectiveness of such tools at reaching potential and/or return visitors. Furthermore, with the foundation of social media tools, SMO, and CGM built around the use of personal narratives as a means of sharing and promoting information,

researchers and practitioners need to better understand the effectiveness of using such narratives as marketing and behavioral tools.

CONCLUSION

This study examined promotional travel narratives and in doing so, provides evidence of the implementation and promise of two consumer behavior scales to the study of travel and tourism. It suggests that skepticism plays an important role in determining the persuasive power of travel narrative promotional materials. Specifically, skepticism towards either travel articles or travel brochures has the ability to negatively influence degree of narrative transportation; perhaps, due to the notion that skepticism towards the promotional sources leads individuals to read the excerpt in a more critical, analytical fashion rather than allowing them to become lost or transported by the excerpt.

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